1793 and the Aftermath of the French Revolution

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Abstract: In 1789, many British radicals interpreted the early events of the French Revolution in mythic terms, as signs that a cataclysmic event, akin to the Christian apocalypse (entailing the renovation of the fallen world), was at hand—and that, paradoxically, human beings rather than God were the agents of this absolute change. However, two major events in 1793 undermined the optimism of these readings: the regicide of Louis XVI and the start of the subsequent Reign of Terror. These disturbing events left many radicals questioning the viability of revolution and, more specifically, the efficacy of violence in producing fundamental and widespread change for the better. Using William Blake's America as a case study, this article examines how the violence of 1793 not only complicated and ultimately terminated the possibility of interpreting the revolutionary events in France as a fulfillment of the grand biblical narrative of human regeneration but also placed in doubt the potential for human interventions in the historico-political realm to ever initiate this new world.

Diane Piccitto, "On 1793 and the Aftermath of the French Revolution"

> Few persons but those who have lived in it can conceive or comprehend what the memory of the French Revolution was, nor what a visionary world seemed to open upon those who were just entering it. Old things seemed passing away, and nothing was dreamt of but the regeneration of the human race.
>
> Robert Southey, 1824

[1]The anticipation of revolutionary change that had been growing for many British radical writers during the American Revolution (1775-1783) had reached a feverish pitch by 1789, when the events of the French Revolution began. The formation of the National Assembly (17 June), the storming of the Bastille (14 July)—the "great symbolic act which has been associated with the revolution ever since" (Breunig and Levinger 13)—the approval of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (26 August), and the march on Versailles that led to the enforced relocation of the royal family to Paris (5-6 October) fired the imagination of many abroad regarding the political and spiritual future of Europe.[2] Yet while the spark of revolution in 1789 seemed to ignite the flames of a visionary world, the chilling events of 1793 began to extinguish them.[3]

British radicals viewed the French Revolution of 1789 not simply as a localized occurrence but also as a mythic event of worldwide importance, "as the portent of universal felicity" (Abrams 64). According to M. H. Abrams, "Richard Price and Joseph Priestley . . . led a chorus of prophets who invested the political events in France with the explosive power of the great Western myth of apocalypse, and so expanded a local phenomenon into the perfervid expectation that man everywhere was at the threshold of an earthly paradise restored" (331). The revolution, then, was interpreted as nothing less than the start of a total transformation of the world on par with the Second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgment, which would end history and return humanity to an uncorrupted, pre-fallen state where the ideals of liberty and equality would once again be a reality. This exuberant reading gave rise to an apocalyptic language that grafted the Christian myth of humanity's restoration onto secular ideas of enlightenment and the progress of civilization to describe the momentous years in the late eighteenth century, suggesting that such a goal was in the process of being reached by one cataclysmic event—the revolution in France—that would make a decisive and final impact on the world.

This dual-edged apocalyptic discourse is evident in the writings of early supporters. In 1789, Price, like others, used prophetic imagery to frame the events unfolding in France as an extension and, indeed, escalation of the American Revolution. He proclaimed to "all . . . friends of freedom": "And now, methinks, I see the ardor for liberty catching and spreading. . . . Behold, the light you have struck out, after setting AMERICA free, reflected to FRANCE, and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes, and warms and illuminates EUROPE!" (18). In a revelatory moment that echoes that of John of Patmos in the Book of Revelation, whose vision includes a fiery and violent cleansing of the earth, Price envisioned America's revolutionary fire traversing the Atlantic and spreading to France and then across the continent in "a diffusion of knowledge" about "the rights of men." His image of Europe illuminated by the revolutionary "blaze" resonates with Revelation's description of the new Jerusalem: "the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof" (21.23). Merging secular notions of enlightenment with the apocalyptic formation of the new Jerusalem, Price depicted the newly liberated world as one lit by the fires of revolution, whereby human action in the form of revolt against oppression functioned similarly to "the glory of God" in its illuminating potential.[4]

However, not everyone interpreted the spread of revolution as the spread of spiritual and political liberation. A year after Price's infamous discourse, Edmund Burke, the strongest voice of the opposition, interpreted the fall of the *ancien régime*—namely, the French monarchy—as "[t]he usurpation which, in order to subvert antient institutions, has destroyed antient principles, will hold power by arts similar to those by which it has acquired it" (38), arts that are "savage and brutal" (39). Burke's reading ominously foreshadowed the bloody events of the early 1790s, events that challenged the radicals' optimistic politico-spiritual interpretation. Nevertheless, he too saw the events in France in cosmic proportions, declaring the French to be "wag[ing] war with Heaven itself" in a

"monstrous tragic-comic scene" (23) that had the power to transform civilization for the worse.

Early on, Burke's assessment elicited a number of critiques that focused on the need for a widespread overhaul of Europe's socio-political systems and excused or validated the violence that would inevitably accompany this overhaul. Such validations stemmed in part from the biblical depiction of apocalypse and in part from the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), whose writings underpinned many of the revolution's ideals and condoned using violence as a means to unseat a tyrant: "Force alone maintained him; force alone brings him down" (79). For instance, Mary Wollstonecraft, responding quickly to Burke, argued that he would have Europeans "reverence the rust of antiquity" (55) and ignore the fact that "[t]he civilization which has taken place in Europe has been very partial" (56), stating her case for the necessity of fundamental change for people of all classes, not just the upper echelons, in order to reclaim humanity's "natural rights" (58). Implicitly dismissing the accompanying violence of the revolution, she accused Burke of taking an anti-Christian and anti-progressive stance in his opposition: "had you been a Jew—you would have joined in the cry, crucify him!—crucify him! The promulgator of a new doctrine, and the violator of old laws and customs, that . . . rested on Divine authority" (58). Using the language of anti-Semitism, Wollstonecraft paints Burke as an apostate who renounces Christian salvation by resisting the revolution and Enlightenment ideals of advancement, an action she compares to the denouncement of Jesus, a revolutionary figure who ushered in a new era. At the same time, this negative comparison infuses the revolution with "Divine authority" and saving potential.[5]

Employing a more secular discourse, Helen Maria Williams asked rhetorically, "[W]here do the records of history point out a revolution unstained by some actions of barbarity?" (81), thus drawing on historical precedent to excuse the violence—"a few shocking instances of public vengeance"—for the attainment of "the liberty of twenty-four millions of people" (82). Likewise, in early 1791, Thomas Paine maintained his support for deep-seated change, declaring "the original establishment . . . too abominably filthy to be cleansed, by any thing short of a complete and universal revolution" (74). Taking up the view of the revolutionary moment as cataclysmic, he stated, "What were formerly called Revolutions, were little more than a change of persons, or an alteration of local circumstances. . . . But what we now see in the world, from the Revolutions of America and France, are a renovation of the natural order of things, . . . combining moral with political happiness," a renovation with "universal" scope (87). Borrowing the heightened language of biblical apocalypse, Paine suggested that the transformative power of these "real" revolutions had a spiritual aspect. Indeed, the fervour of the responses both in favour of and opposing the revolution reveals what Southey's reminiscence more than three decades later does: the general view of the French Revolution was that it had the power, for better or worse, to precipitate "the end of an entire form of civilization" (Mee and Fallon 4).[6]

What is significant for my reading of 1793 is not simply the millenarian expectations that surrounded the revolution but the fact that supporters believed it was a cataclysmic event being actualized by human hands rather than divine ones—"apocalypse by revolution"—a "secular means of renovating the world" (Abrams 334). While British writers were producing texts that described the events in France in terms of this secularization of apocalyptic agency (although some, such as Price and Wollstonecraft, continued to invoke Christianity to validate the cause), the French, the human actors of the revolution, were actually wielding this new power. They demonstrated this shift in agency, "constructing a new world on the ashes of the old" (Breunig and Levinger 58), by, for example, standing against the king and even implementing the (short-lived) Revolutionary Calendar (October 1793). Year I began not with the birth of Christ but with the official renunciation of the monarchy and the pronouncement of the French Republic on 22 September 1792. In addition, the new calendar abolished Sundays in an attempt to eradicate religious influences and secularize the nation.

Actions such as the creation of the Revolutionary Calendar and the dethronement and execution of the king exemplified the ways the French challenged and appropriated divine power, including the divine right of justice and vengeance. Indeed, Slavoj Žižek argues that this appropriation resulted in what he calls divine violence. He explains divine violence as follows: "God himself has lost his neutrality and 'fallen into' the world, brutally intervening, delivering justice. 'Divine violence' stands for such brutal intrusions of justice beyond law" (*Violence* 151). This image of the fallen deity who enters human history serves as a mythic explanation for what happens when the masses violently transgress the law to obtain a justice that the law (and God) has failed to produce. According to Žižek, "Divine violence should thus be conceived as divine in the precise sense of the old Latin motto *vox populi, vox dei* [the voice of the people (is) the voice of God]: . . . the heroic assumption of the

solitude of sovereign decision. It is a decision (to kill, to risk or lose one's own life) made in absolute solitude, with no cover in the big Other" (171). In other words, God falls and thus enters His obsolescence the moment individuals take it upon themselves to intervene in such a way that shakes the foundations of society. God not only falls, but He also fails to effect justice. Thus, divine violence is "the sign of the injustice of the world, of the world being ethically 'out of joint'" (169), with no God in sight to realign it. Paradoxically, then, divine violence must be implemented by human hands to correct the imbalance.

Within this framework of divine violence, Southey's description of the events in France in 1789 suggests that the off-kilter world was being set right again through revolt. The French Revolution would not simply anticipate the Christian apocalypse; it would, in fact, activate its own apocalypse without the need for divine intervention. Indeed, Southey's interpretation of the revolutionary moment—that "a visionary world seemed to open upon those who were just entering it" (52)—implies a causal connection between the apocalyptic event and the deeds of the human actors. Read as a metaphor for the efficacy of action, his account of the formation of a new world at the point in which humans enter into that world indicates they were creating a new order of things by collapsing the *ancien régime* and challenging tyrannical forms of government. For Žižek, this enacting of the Christian apocalypse by mortal beings is the essence of divine violence: it is "the Judgement Day for the long history of oppression, exploitation, [and] suffering" (Introduction xi), with "the Last Days" signifying the time "an out-of-joint world will finally be set straight" (*Violence* 158) by people and not by God. Similarly, for many British writers like Southey, human beings were creating their own cataclysmic event to halt the progress of history and its injustices without divine aid. This singular moment in history was thought to be heralding the eternal now, a return to paradise, where fallen humanity would be redeemed. To live through the exhilaration of 1789 was to live with one foot in time and space and the other in the eternal and the infinite; it was to live in two imbricating worlds: the everyday one and the visionary one of a new order of things.

But the vision did not last. As the violence escalated, the rallying cry of "*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*" could no longer impel many to justify the means by the ends. The September Massacres of 1792 that followed the storming of the Tuileries in Paris (where the King and Queen had been relocated from Versailles) and the subsequent slaughtering of political prisoners functioned as preludes to the disillusioning events of the following year. 1793 became a key juncture in the revolution. It began with the execution of King Louis XVI (21 January)[7]—prompting Britain to sever diplomatic relations with France, leading to declarations of war by the two countries—and culminated with the Reign of Terror (5 September 1793 – 27 July 1794), which resulted in the execution of the Queen (16 October), many suspects of treason, and members of the Girondins, the more moderate faction that the radical Jacobins brought down earlier in the year (2 June). The Terror finally ended on 27 July 1794 with the overthrow of Maximilien Robespierre, who was guillotined the next day.

This Terror had its roots in the formation of the Committee of Public Safety (6 April 1793), eventually led by Robespierre (August), who spoke of the "salutary terror of the people's justice" (65)—an "inflexible justice" (125)—in the face of tyranny. The decisive inaugural event occurred on 5 September when the National Convention (France's ruling body from 1793 to 1795) officially put into effect terror measures in order to subdue opposition to and punish insufficient support for the revolution and the new regime. Such measures manifested themselves in, for example, the implementation of the Law of Suspects (17 September), "which mandated that any 'enemy of liberty' could be accused of treason," including not only those who explicitly rejected the revolution but also those who did not explicitly support it, thereby "equating neutrality with treason" (Breunig and Levinger 40). From the autumn of 1793 until the summer of 1794, thousands of people across the country were imprisoned and executed under the ruthless leadership of Robespierre. The guillotine, particularly the one in Paris's Place de la Révolution, served as the bloody emblem of the government's fear tactics. The violence and bloodshed escalated to such a point that whole-hearted support by even the most radical of supporters became difficult to maintain, prompting many to lose faith in the divine potency of human action in the material realm and the promised "regeneration of the human race" (Southey 52).[8]

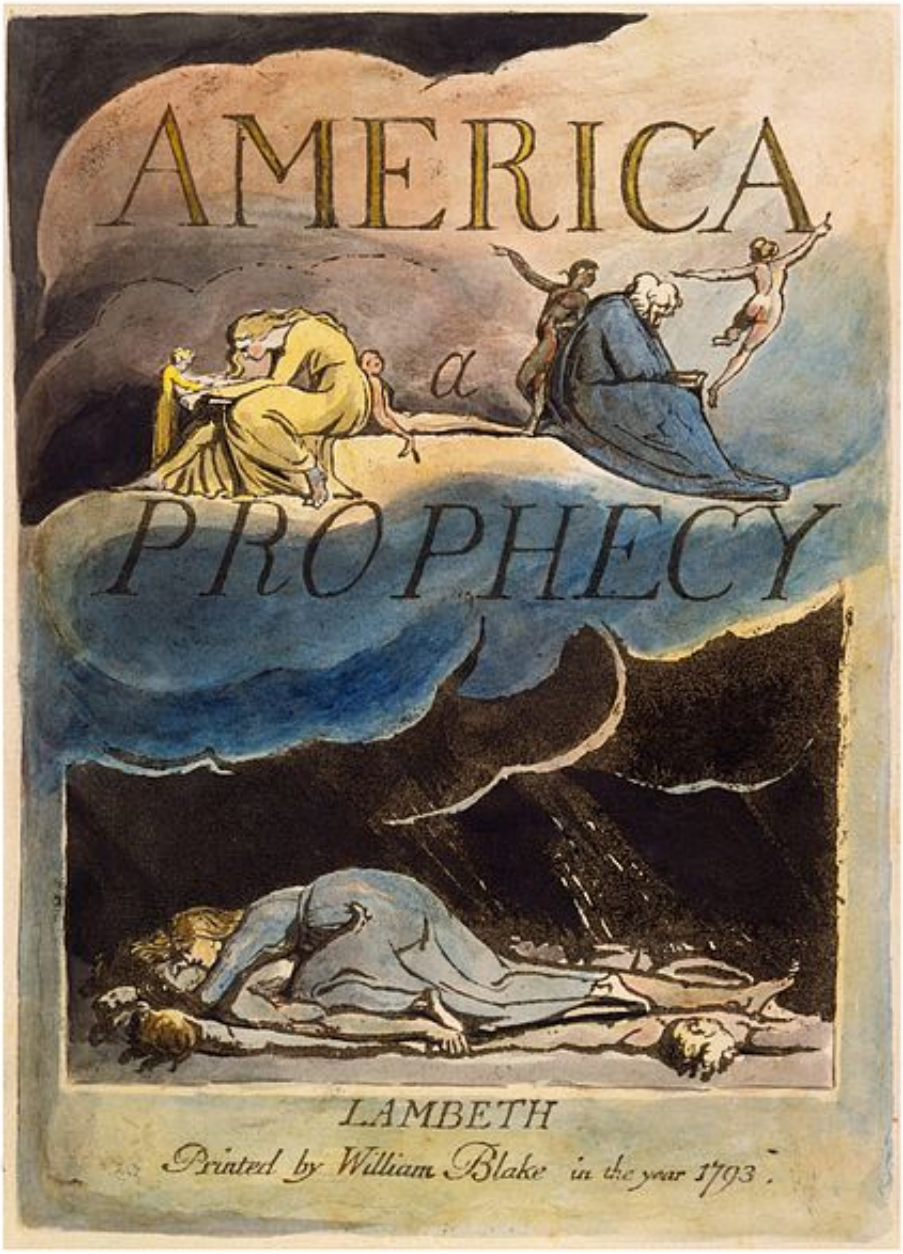

Figure 1: Title Page of William Blake's _America_

William Blake was one such British radical whose faith in human action was shaken by the disjunction between 1789 and 1793 as well as by the question of violence's efficacy in generating progress. This struggle manifests itself in his illuminated work *America a Prophecy*, first printed in "autumn 1793" (Dörrbecker 73). (See Fig. 1.) Far from foretelling the future, *America* looks backward in order to reveal the significance of the here and now, writing the past to speak the present. It does so in two ways: inserting the French Revolution in a larger narrative of historical revolutions and mythologizing the momentous event as a sign of the Christian apocalypse, as other contemporaries had done. On the historico-political level, the text depicts the American Revolution as a precursor to and direct catalyst of the French Revolution, echoing Price's sentiments. Blake demonstrates the idea of continuity through the actions of the character Orc, a personification of the spirit of revolution, who is involved in both conflicts. On the level of myth, *America* begins with a design showing the expulsion from Eden, beneath which is a textual description of the liberation of Orc, who has been imprisoned. This association suggests that the battle against tyranny is rooted in Eden and that revolution is a way to regain paradise, as Southey had intimated. Indeed, Orc sees his apocalypse—his vanquishing of the tyrant Urizen and his oppressive forces—as equivalent to biblical ones when he declares, "For Empire is no more, and now the Lion & Wolf shall cease" (plate 6, line 15;

page 53).[9] Thus, Blake invested the French Revolution not only with the promise of historical and political change but also with a mythic and spiritual destiny: the return to Eden.

Similar to Southey's statement, which implies that an apocalypse can be accomplished by human hands, Blake's *America* suggests that the revolution is fought not only in the divine or mythic domain but also in the domain of human history. The war between revolutionary and tyrannical forces personified in the conflict between the mythopoetic figures Orc and Urizen parallels the war between American citizens and British forces. Like other writers of his time, then, Blake champions the idea that the power to create a new world order lies in human hands:

> Fury! rage! madness! in a wind swept through America
> And the red flames of Orc that folded roaring fierce around
> The angry shores, and the fierce rushing of th'inhabitants together:
> The citizens of New-York close their books & lock their chests;
> The mariners of Boston drop their anchors and unlade;
> The scribe of Pensylvania casts his pen upon the earth;
> The builder of Virginia throws his hammer down in fear.
> Then had America been lost, o'erwhelm'd by the Atlantic,
> And Earth had lost another portion of the infinite,
> But all rush together in the night in wrath and raging fire
> The red fires rag'd! the plagues recoil'd! then rolld they back with fury
> On Albions Angels. (14.25-15.1, 56)

Overseen by Orc, "the fierce Americans rushing together in the night" (15.12, 57) combat oppressive forces, employing violence to challenge violence. The text ends with the promise of Orc's return as he manifests himself in France to overthrow Urizenic powers once again, something that entails a complete renovation of human perception, and, implicitly, of the world itself. Such a conclusion appears to do more than endorse the use of violent methods in order to achieve a total historico-political transformation; it appears to celebrate it.

Furthermore, it is significant that Blake specifically identifies the revolutionaries—New Yorkers, Bostonians, Pennsylvanians, and Virginians—who beat back the oppressive forces of the East. Historical figures such as George Washington, Thomas Paine, and John Hancock are also named in the text and initiate battles of their own against British forces, just as Orc grapples with Urizen's and Albion's Angels. Without the resistance of these historic personages and the citizens of the American colonies to the English forces, America would have been crushed. "Then had America been lost," and the result would have been that the "Earth had lost another portion of the infinite," showing that the cost would have been levied on a historico-political level as well as on a mytho-spiritual level. America's victory secures that part of the world that is eternal, its divine spark. In preserving the infinite through its actions, then, humanity demonstrates its divine power.

In this light, Orc and the revolutionary throngs can be seen as manifestations of Žižek's divine violence, as well as reflections of Blake's rejection of orthodox Christianity, which he appropriates in his own mytho-historical text. If "divine violence is *a sign of God's (the big Other's) own impotence*" (*Violence* 170; original emphasis), then not only has God failed humanity, but He is also revealed to lack potency in human affairs; humans must take their destiny in their own hands. "[T]he fierce Americans" represent the human signifiers of Orc's mythic violence, the "*vox populi, vox dei*." Such a reading suggests that the masses take on "the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility for the fate of divine creation, and thus for God himself" (Žižek, *Violence* 157), as their salvation of a "portion of the infinite" indicates (Blake 14.33, 56). In 1789, this "freedom and responsibility" seemed less like a "burden" and more like divine potency. But, by 1793, this divine potency was translated into the burden of history and human failings, exemplified in relentless and unjustifiable brutality; it became a freedom and responsibility difficult to bear.

Despite the apparent power of Orc in mythic and in historic realms, *America* demonstrates how maintaining confident and unquestioning optimism in the positive potential of revolutionary action became impossible in 1793. Blake unsettles Orc's promise of political and apocalyptic change by depicting him ambiguously. For instance,

Blake uses the epithet “terror” for Orc (e.g., 5.2, 53 and 8.1, 54), inevitably echoing the revolutionary terror occurring in France while he was producing the text. Also, the work begins with a “Preludium” that draws a dualistic picture of Orc. There, the shadowy daughter, who is both freed and victimized by Orc’s violent actions, views the revolutionary moment as both welcome and disturbing: thanks to Orc, she “smiled her first-born smile” and is able to speak for the first time, but she also perceives their encounter as “eternal death; and . . . the torment long foretold” (2.4, 2.17, 52).[10] The work’s equivocal view of revolution is exacerbated by the way Blake’s iconography draws parallels between what should be opposing entities: Orc and Urizen, freedom fighter and tyrant. Blake depicts them in the same physical pose (plates 8 and 10) and even places Orc’s speech beneath the image of Urizen (plate 8), obscuring the origin of the voice and complicating an interpretation of the revolutionary claims made. This representational ambiguity creates doubt as to Orc’s lasting effects.

Already qualified to some extent by the ambiguous depiction of Orc and his actions, revolutionary violence becomes much more questionable in Blake’s revisions of the text, especially in the Bard’s actions at the end of the two-plate Preludium. The introductory action ends with a curious moment of meta-narrative, a nameless Bard’s rejection of the poem itself:

> The stern Bard ceas’d, asham’d of his own song; enrag’d he swung
> His harp aloft sounding, then dash’d its shining frame against
> A ruin’d pillar in glittring fragments; silent he turn’d away. (2.18-20, 52)

The Bard’s act of destroying the medium with which he has produced his shameful song suggests not only a rejection of the contents of *America* but also Blake’s frustration with poetic creation, namely his attempt to imaginatively depict the revolution. As a result, he turns toward silence rather than expression. Blake struggled between avowing and disavowing *America*, as is reflected in the insertion or deletion of the shattering-of-the-harp episode in various copies of the work over time. While the lines were engraved on the initial plates made in 1793, they were masked in the first printings.[11] The episode appears in only a few printed copies of the work, the first in 1795 and the last in 1821. The fact that Blake wrote the lines and then masked them demonstrates his conflict with how to present the contents of *America* to the public, a conflict that continued throughout his lifetime.

The problem of reading an event comes to the foreground in the Bard’s reaction and Blake’s vacillation between including and omitting the episode. Precisely how was one to understand the revolution? And how was one to reconcile an intense commitment to it after 1793? By representing the revolution in what can be read as divine violence, the Bard and Blake are left to wrestle with these questions, especially the question of violence’s efficacy. Part of the difficulty is that, as “a sign without meaning,” divine violence has “no ‘objective’ criteria enabling us to identify an act of violence as divine; the same act that, to an external observer, is merely an outburst of violence can be divine for those engaged in it—there is no big Other guaranteeing its divine nature, the risk of reading and assuming it as divine is fully the subject’s own” (Žižek, *Violence* 169). Both the Bard and Blake find themselves in this dangerous territory, which explains the shattering of the harp and the impulse to unmask these lines. The price of divine violence is “the fear of the abyss of the act” (Žižek, Introduction xxvi), the fear that rather than ending history with an apocalyptic bang and paving the way for regeneration, the violence will fail to usher in the paradisal eternal now and be no more than brutality. Thus, there is no possibility of “displacing the blame onto some figure of the big Other” (xxv) because the act of appropriating His power has already evicted Him.

Arguably, the Bard’s disavowal of his song indicates disillusionment with the Urizen-Orc struggle. The end of the work shows Urizen’s suppression of Orc, “[h]iding” him away for “twelve years” (16.13-14, 57), possibly signaling the approximate time between the American and French revolutions. By beginning with an imprisoned Orc, who then frees himself and carries out a successful American Revolution, only to be captured before escaping to enact the French one, Blake depicts the fight between tyrant and rebel (and, indeed, all of history) as cyclical rather than progressive. The cycle imagery implies an unending series of revolutions, undermining the possibility of one absolute and final conflict and the viability of a human-made apocalypse. Citing the early years of the French Revolution, Žižek argues, “Since, after the revolutionary explosion of rage, full satisfaction never takes place and an inequality and hierarchy re-emerge, there always arises a push for the *second*—true, integral—revolution which will satisfy the disappointed and truly finish the emancipatory work” (*Violence* 158-59;

original emphasis). But how can a "true" revolution be determined? What the struggle between the tyrannical institutions and the revolutionary masses effects is not, in fact, an apocalypse by human hands; it is, as Blake says elsewhere, a "stand still," where one is "unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again" (*There Is No Natural Religion* 3). Tyrant and oppressed continue to war against and even replace each other—a revolution in another sense of the word. In 1793, the question that arose for those who had lived through 1789 (and continues to haunt revolutionary action today) was how to break the cycle and ensure a successful turn of events.

Moreover, the episode with the Bard resonates with Blake's own earlier attempt to write about contemporary events. Two years before *America*, Blake began and then abandoned a poem called *The French Revolution* that addressed the events in France in a less opaque way by not employing the arcane figures from his own personal mythology. This aborted effort suggests that, by 1793, history alone was insufficient for Blake to examine the idea of revolution; he needed the second lens of myth. But *America* itself is, arguably, an anomaly because it is the first and last of his illuminated works to interweave history and myth so extensively and explicitly.[12] In fact, myth began to dominate his later works, including the remainder of the continental prophecies, *Europe* and *The Song of Los* (consisting of *Africa* and *Asia*), only to be followed by the Lambeth prophecies, or Urizen books (started in 1794), which seem primarily concerned with retelling the events of Genesis and the Fall rather than historical events. In addition, historical persons no longer held a dominant place in the cast of characters.[13] Thus, after 1793, Blake distances himself from an interpretation of the French Revolution as divine violence, as a cataclysmic human intervention that would initiate the regeneration of humanity.

If "[t]ransgression is what makes historical beings of us," as Terry Eagleton says of humanity's fall from paradise (243), then, for many British radical writers, the French Revolution was to be the ultimate act of transgression that would put an end to history. However, by 1793, once-hopeful visionaries had to come to grips with the fact that they were irrevocably caught within history, that human hands had failed to materialize the eternal now, and that the events in France did not embody the human potential to usher in the apocalypse and transform the world. What radicals like Blake were faced with was how to maintain a faith in revolutionary ideals and human interventions when challenged with the by-products of violence and terror, something that was not at all clear in 1793, and something that is equally opaque and urgent today.

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ENDNOTES

[1] A condensed version of this article appeared under the title “1793” in “Jahrgänge: Versuche über historische

Gleichzeitigkeit," the introductory essay to Zeitgenossenschaft/Le Contemporain/Contemporaneity, volume 19 (2011) of *Variations: Literaturzeitschrift der Universität Zürich* (18-21).

[2] The historical dates for the revolutionary events throughout this article are from Charles Breunig and Matthew Levinger's *The Revolutionary Era* and William Doyle's *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*.

[3] In both earlier Romantic scholarship (e.g., the work of M. H. Abrams) and more recent studies (e.g., J. R. Watson's), this is a recurrent view of the reactions to the revolution and its aftermath: "the enthusiasm with which the fall of the Bastille had been welcomed in 1789 had been succeeded by a more doubtful and more measured approval, which, as the events unfolded, became more complicated" (Watson 39).

[4] Furthermore, Price explicitly connects Christian redemption with his contemporaneous moment when he quotes the Gospel of Luke (2.29-30): "What an eventful period is this! I am thankful that I have lived to it; and I could almost say, *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation*. I have lived to see a diffusion of knowledge . . . [and] the rights of men better understood than ever" (18). Like Simeon who sees Jesus in the temple, Price is now ready to meet his maker because he, too, has looked into the face of humanity's saviour, but this salvation arrives in the form of the French Revolution.

[5] Price had used similar rhetoric to implicitly endorse revolutionary action, stating that the "doctrines of passive obedience, non-resistance, and the divine right of kings" are not only "odious" but more importantly "a blasphemy against [God]" and "an insult on common sense" (18).

[6] In *Political Justice*, published 14 February 1793, radical writer William Godwin redefines the stakes of the debate on the French Revolution. By then, the question for him was not centered on the events in France themselves but on the best way to promote change in general: "No question can be more important than that which respects the best mode of effecting revolutions" (164). Godwin advocated not violence but rational discussion, stating, "The true instruments for changing the opinions of men are argument and persuasion. . . . If then we would improve the social institutions of mankind, we must write, we must argue, we must converse" (164-65). For Godwin, socio-political advancement would occur not with a cataclysmic event but with the "the still and quiet progress of reason" (165). Countering the apocalyptic view of revolutionary change, he claimed that one must be prepared "willingly to suffer the lapse of years before he urges the reducing his theory into actual execution" in order to achieve "the regeneration of his species" (165), the manifestation of equality and justice that the current corrupt state was suppressing.

[7] Even years after the guillotining of the king, the regicide had a key role in the debates about how to end the war with France, as is evident in Burke's *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796-1797), where he vociferously attempts to dissuade his country from forming any kind of diplomatic relations with France by listing the dangers of seeking a peace with a government of king killers.

[8] In his introduction to a recent English translation of Robespierre's speeches, Žižek explores the possibility of "emancipatory terror" (xxi) and offers a critical examination of "[t]he typical liberal attitude" and "its formula [of] '1789 without 1793,'" arguing that such a formula exemplifies a hope for "a decaffeinated revolution, a revolution which doesn't smell of revolution" (vii).

[9] See Isaiah 11.6 and 65.25 for potential sources of this line.

[10] John Beer argues that Orc's brutal act in the Preludium "is not an event preliminary to those which are to happen in the book itself, but an interpretive enactment of their meaning. The revolutionary violence involved in achieving independence is the distorting of an energy that might have made the union between Britain and America a fruitful marriage" (93). From the beginning of the work, then, the positive valence of the dispersal of Orc's revolutionary energy is in doubt.

[11] As D. W. Dörrbecker explains, in copy G, which was likely the first copy of *America* that Blake printed, the sheets imprinted with the relief-etching of the copperplate originals show that these lines were erased, indicating that they were, indeed, composed/engraved along with the original text (74-75).

[12] I am not arguing that Blake's later works avoid engagement with his historical moment—David Erdman convincingly showed that this is not the case; rather, I am arguing that, at the level of narrative, Blake moves toward myth and away from explicit references to the people and events of his time.

[13] Blake's epic poem *Milton* includes the seventeenth-century writer John Milton as the protagonist, but this construction of him is a mythic one.